DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 184 424 CS 205 425

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TITLE Mississippi Writers in Context. Narrative Report of Accomplishment, July 15, 1975 through June 31, 1977.
INSTITUTION Mississippi Library Commission, Jackson.
SPONS AGENCY National Endowment for the Humanities (NFAH). Washington, D.C.
PUB DATE 30 Apr 78
NOTE 14p.

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adult Education; *Authors; Educational Television; Humanities; *Institutional Cooperation; *Library Services; *Literature Appreciation; Local Color Writing; Postsecondary Education; Program Descriptions; *Public Libraries
IDENTIFIERS *Mississippi

ABSTRACT

A statewide project designed to stimulate the interest of out-of-school adults in the humanities resources of Mississippi public libraries involved the cooperative efforts of professional librarians, English educators, novelists, and historians. Project activities included the production of a series of six television programs featuring noted Mississippi authors discussing their work with humanities professors and the preparation of some 30 booklets introducing library patrons to the works of Mississippi writers and evaluating the writers' ideas and artistic accomplishments. Positive results of the project were that a significant number of Mississippians read important works of literature and history with increased pride in their literary heritage, a rapport was established between humanists and public librarians throughout the state, and a lively tradition was established of public humanities programs in Mississippi public libraries. (AEA)

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Narrative Report of Accomplishment

MISSISSIPPI WRITERS IN CONTEXT

Grant # PD-23351-75-481

in the amount of $180 thousand

to the

Mississippi Library Commission,

July 15, 1975 to June 31, 1977

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Joseph E. Stockwell
Robert L. Phillips, Jr.

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Submitted by

Joseph E. Stockwell

and

Robert L. Phillips, Jr.,
Co-Project Directors

Department of English
Mississippi State University

April 30, 1978

CS205425

I. BACKGROUND

The "Mississippi Writers in Context" project had its genesis in the late fall of 1974, when the project directors met in Jackson with the director and staff of the Mississippi Library Commission and selected public librarians, where it was decided to submit a proposal to the National Endowment for the Humanities for a statewide project designed to stimulate the interest of out-of-school adults in the humanities resources of Mississippi public libraries.

Since Mississippi is unusually rich in distinguished authors, we decided to make Mississippi literature the focal point of our campaign, and to design a two-part program for implementation in 1975 and 1976, the first part to be a six-week discussion series on the Mississippi ETV network featuring noted scholars and authors, the second part a prodigious number of read and discuss programs in Mississippi public libraries.

Our original schedule called for the TV series to be taped in mid-summer of 1975 for weekly airings beginning in September; it was our intention to launch the read and discuss programs at the same time.

As the reader will doubtless know, our original time frame collapsed, as did our original concept, for the grant letter of 27 June 1975 from Deputy Chairman Robert Kingston reflected "the decision of our National Council not to support the district library programs." We were, however, authorized to provide limited consultative services to Mississippi public libraries, and to produce booklets on Mississippi literature for the use of the patrons of those libraries.

II. PROJECT ACTIVITIES

A. TV Series

1. Narrative of Events

The first order of business when grant funds became available was to produce the television series which was to publicize the project and serve as a vehicle to interest as many out-of-school adults in the humanities resources available in Mississippi's public libraries.

As indicated, the original schedule set up in the grant proposal could not be followed owing to unavoidable delays in the notification of the grant award. However, a new schedule was immediately devised

and the Library Commission representatives worked very closely with J. E. Stockwell to make the necessary arrangements for finding sites to tape the series and for a conference of major participants. Actual taping was finally scheduled for September 15 through September 21.

The Mississippi Authority for Educational Television made firm arrangements with the Jefferson-Pilot Broadcast Company of Charlotte, North Carolina, for the necessary equipment and technicians. MAET also made plans for a large number of the agency's own staff to participate.

On August 5 the project directors, the producer, representatives of the Library Commission and an MAET engineer began a two-week search for usable sites. The party traveled to Oxford, Holly Springs, Greenville, Lake Washington, Vicksburg, Rodney, Port Gibson and Natchez. The bulkiness of the equipment and the availability of energy supplies made the selection process somewhat tedious. However, the six primary and six alternate sites were selected to the time allowed.

On August 26, 27, and 28 a meeting with the consultants and primary participants, Louis Rubin, T. D. Young, and Lewis P. Simpson was held in Jackson. Titles for the segments of A Climate for Genius and a final list of participants was agreed upon. General outlines for each segment was discussed.

Actual taping began on September 15 at Oxford. "Tales of Yoknapatawpha" about William Faulkner was taped in front of Faulkner's home, Rowanoak. Participating as discussants were Louis Rubin, Alumni Distinguished Professor English at the University of North Carolina; Lewis P. Simpson, William A. Read Professor of English at Louisiana State University; and T. D. Young, Gertrude Vanderbilt Professor of English at Vanderbilt University; Blyden Jackson, Associate Dean of the Graduate School at the University of North Carolina; and Shelby Foote, distinguished Mississippi novelist and historian.

The following day on another part of the grounds of Rowanoak "A Native Son" was taped. Rubin, Simpson, Young, and Jackson were joined by Margaret Walker, distinguished poet, novelist and educator, to discuss the work of Richard Wright as well as that of Miss Walker.

On September 17 "Deep Delta" was taped at Mt. Holly Plantation on Lake Washington, twenty miles south of Greenville. Rubin, Simpson, Young, and Foote were joined by Ellen Douglas, author of four novels, and Hodding Carter III, then editor and owner of the Greenville Delta Democrat Times. The group discussed the work of W. A. and Walker Percy, Foote, Douglas and Elizabeth Spencer.

"A Time and A Place" about the fiction of Eudora Welty was taped on September 18 in Natchez. Elizabeth Spencer, an award-winning Mississippi novelist, and Peggy Prenshaw, an accomplished critic of Miss Welty's work, joined Rubin, Simpson, and Young for the discussion.

Mississippi historian, John K. Bettersworth, Academic Vice President of Mississippi State University, and Arthur DeRosier, Academic Vice Chancellor at the University of Mississippi joined Rubin, Simpson, and Young for a discussion of nineteenth century literary efforts in Mississippi, "Out of the Past." The program was taped on September 19 in Natchez.

Natchez also provided the location for the taping of the final program, "The New Order," which was taped on September 20. Evans Harrington, novelist and Professor of English at the University of Mississippi; James Seay, Mississippi poet and member of the faculty at the University of North Carolina; and Robert Phillips, MWC Project Director for Resources, joined Rubin, Simpson, and Young for the discussion.

To tape the series MAET procured the services of two portable taping units. The primary unit was equipped with three cameras and three video tape recorders. The second unit had one camera and one recorder. The primary unit taped the discussion while the secondary unit traveled independently and recorded video material which was edited into the program tapes.

Editing began almost immediately after the taping was finished and was not finished until December 9 even though the first program "Out of the Past" was televised on November 9. Editing took place usually three nights each week, 5 p.m. to 12 midnight, at the facilities at MAET.

On October 13 Cicely Tyson came to Jackson to tape introductions, conclusions and spot announcements for the series. Miss Tyson's contract specified two airings with repeat showings of the tapes over the MAET system. The first showing began November 9 (Sunday) at 1:30 p.m. with the repeat the following Monday night at 8:30 p.m. The schedude was as follows:

November 9/10-- "Out of the Past"
November 16/17--"Deep Delta"
November 23/24--"A Time and A Place"
November 30/December 1--"Tales of Yoknapatawpha"
December 7/8--"A Native Son"
December 14/15--"The New Order"

The following spring (1976) the series was aired during the week of the Mississippi Arts Festival. Programmers felt that consecutive showings would be beneficial given the nature of the programs, and such a schedule did allow the series to be repeated the following fall. The spring showing began on Sunday, April 25 and concluded the following Friday. The fall repeat broadcasts began on November 7, 1976, and concluded on December 12, 9 p.m., Sunday evenings.

2. Comments

The usefulness of the television series extended beyond the immediate broadcasts. Ten sets of the edited tapes were kept in the Library Commission to be loaned to libraries and many libraries made their own copies from the broadcast. There has been a constant demand for the Library Commission's sets.

There was a great deal of interest in the state in the TV series, and the broadcasts seem to have accomplished their purpose. However, the project directors, producers and directors are not completely satisfied with the tapes. The abandonment of our original time frame seriously handicapped us in this aspect of the project and doubtless has an adverse-effect on the finished product.

B. Print Project--Booklets

1. Narrative

In addition to the television series the resources of the revised project included a series of booklets introducing public library patrons to the works of Mississippi writers and briefly evaluating their ideas and artistic accomplishments. The print project included also the complete transcripts of A Climate for Genius and a collection of out-of-print sketches by writers who lived in Mississippi during the nineteenth century.

Each of the eleven scholars working with the project as advisors to public library systems was required to write booklets. Other booklets were written by scholars in Mississippi colleges and universities. Altogether there were thirty booklets.

The types of booklets printed included general introductions to authors' work, general introductions to important genre in Mississippi, and introductions to specific books. In the first group were eighteen titles:

Author	Title
Dan Hise	William Faulkner
Michael Kreyling	Eudora Welty
Roy Hudson	Richard Wright

Sarah A. Rouse	Tennessee Williams
William A. Sullivan	Walker Percy
Thomas Richardson	William Alexander Percy
John Pilkington	Stark Young
Joseph Stockwell	Ellen Douglas
E. O. Hawkins	John Faulkner
Robert Phillips	Shelby Foote
James Waddell	Borden Deal
Betty Hearn	Sherwood Bonner
Hilton Anderson	Elizabeth Spencer
Frances Tyler	James Street
Jesse McCartney	Barry Hannah
Brenda Stockwell	Ben Ames Williams
Gay Chow	Wirt Williams
James Webb	Irwin Russell

There were two general introductions to significant genre:

Author	Title
Louis E. Dollarhide	MISSISSIPPI SHORT STORY WRITERS
Paul Ruffin	MISSISSIPPI POETS

Finally there were eight introductions to important books:

Author	Title
Peggy Prenshaw	An Introduction to THE OPTIMIST'S DAUGHTER
Gayle Goodin	An Introduction to LOSING BATTLES
Robert Phillips	An Introduction to THE GOLDEN APPLES
Walter Everett	An Introduction to ABSALOM, ABSALOM
Tom Brown	An Introduction to GO DOWN, MOSES
Gary Stringer	An Introduction to LIGHT IN AUGUST
Johnny E. Tolliver	An Introduction to NATIVE SON
William Bonney	An Introduction to THE SOUND AND THE FURY

Robert Phillips, project director for resources, edited the transcripts of A Climate for Genius and the collection of antebellum sketches.

Printing the booklets and editing them took a great deal of time. The first booklet was finished on May 21, 1976, and the last one on July 31, 1977. The Central Duplicating facility at Mississippi State University printed the booklets.

2. Comments

The quality of the booklets is uneven. Some scholars, alas, write better than others. In addition, a computerized type setting procedure was employed that introduced numerous typographical mistakes on its own initiative. The project director for resources could never be certain that correct copy would be printed as it had been corrected. As will be pointed further along, the necessity of writing and editing booklets after the termination of the original grant period—i.e. without the luxury or released time to devote to them—doubtless accounts for most of their imperfections.

Nevertheless, the booklets have been favorably received and will surely continue to be useful to Mississippi library patrons.

C. Library Development

1. Narrative

As we mentioned above, the revised project was allowed eleven humanist consultants, to be drawn from our colleges and universities, to serve public librarians in Mississippi's ten planning districts (the Southern planning district being divided into two parts for the purposes of MWIC activities). It was specified that the humanist consultants were to keep themselves aloof from the public served by their libraries and to concentrate on counseling public librarians in their day to day activities. (See Appendix B the personnel and districts involved.)

2. Comments

See the critical retrospective below.

D. A Critical Retrospective of the MWIC Experience

Perhaps the most accurate and important observation made on the MWIC project is that which is set forth in Dr. Carlton Rochell's interim report of March, 1976. He concluded at that time that our concept was sound and our aims laudable, but that our timetable had from the first been suicidal, a fatal flaw for which the project directors must hold themselves culpable. In their own defense, however, they should like to point out that the rather frantic process of writing and rewriting the proposal to the end of finding a concept that could be shared by the Endowment and the Mississippi Library Commission precluded the sort of deliberate and meticulous planning that identifies and eliminates fatal flaws before the event. Our efforts to produce, deliver and promote project materials in a one-year grant period, complicated as it was by collapsing time frames at the outset, gave us what amounted to a thirty-second head start on the posse, and, try as we

might, we were never able to increase our lead. The inevitable result, as Dr. Rochell noted in his interim report, was "hurriedly prepared video cassettes, ill-defined relationships between humanists and librarians, and a general attitude of confusion on the part of local librarians as to what exactly they were supposed to do with all this new found assistance." To Dr. Rochell's words, the project directors can only say "amen." Indeed, in view of the pressures inherent in our timetable, it is remarkable that the materials produced are as good as they turned out to be.

Perhaps the most profound regret on the part of the project directors (and it is one that comes from the heart) is that Dr. Rochell was not involved in the design of the MWIC project from its very inception; however, there is, we think, more to be said on Dr. Rochell's remarks concerning "ill-defined relationships between humanists and librarians." It will be remembered on this point that the bottom line of our original concept was the discussion of literature and history in public libraries. That was the result which the librarians and humanists involved in the planning of the MWIC proposal desired to achieve. In other words, the television series was never conceived of except as the centerpiece of a massive public discussion program. But when we finally went up the gangplank we found no ship, for, as pointed out above, the Endowment funded the means while denying the end of our design. To be sure, we were allowed the aforementioned eleven humanist consultants, but the scope of their activities was clearly restricted. I quote from a letter which Jeff Field wrote us following a visit to Mississippi in August, 1975:

> As I mentioned in my brief remarks at the close of Wednesday's meeting, there seems to be a tendency for the librarians to get caught up with the notion of a program or programs in the sense of public meetings at the library. In terms of promotional activity, it is fine to get librarians out into the community and to generate a great deal of publicity about the project. However, it is not the intention of the project to attract crowds into the library to attend meetings or performances. Rather, the project is to explore ways in which the library can encourage wider use of its resources and materials in the humanities. The focus, then, is upon stimulating people's desire to use the library's materials . . . it is therefore important that the humanists help librarians to generate library activities based upon the librarian's daily routine. That is, if this is truly to be a library project in the humanities, it needs to be based on the kinds of activities librarians are engaged in.

We of course clearly understood and recognized the value of what Jeff was talking about. But it soon became obvious

that the intimate cooperative relationship between librarians and humanists called for in Jeff's letter could only be the child of slow time. Unfortunately, our consultants assumed their duties on an overload basis (and some of them were teaching fifteen hours), and many of the libraries they were appointed to serve were located at some distance from their campuses. The selected letters from our consultants which we have set forth in Appendix B tell their story more eloquently than the project directors can, and we would direct the reader's attention specifically to the letters of Dan Hise, of Millsaps College (pp. 5 through 8 or Appendix B). These letters seem to the project directors to have a quality of poignance, for Dan was inevitably frustrated by distance and time in attempting to implement a policy which he obviously believed in. As might be anticipated, the humanist consultants often asked the project directors for a clearly defined list of duties, but, for reasons that will be inferred, we were never able to provide one.

All in all, then, our consultants tended to sort themselves out into four groups: the one (maybe two) who did very little, the two or three who paid courtesy calls on their libraries (see Jim Webb's letter, for example, pp. 23-25 of Appendix B), those few who, like Dan Hise, did their damndest to do what the Endowment wanted done, and, finally those others who did exactly what their librarians wanted them to do, a policy which, recalling the original thrust of the project, inevitably resulted in a goodly number of forbidden public programs. (See Appendix B for relevant letters from Peggy Prenshaw and Tom Richardson, of the University of Southern Mississippi, as well as the letter of Norman Graham, director of the Gulfport-Harrison County Library System, to President Lucas of USM.)

And there is more to confess. In addition to programs in public libraries which occurred as the result of collusion between librarians and their consultants, the project directors plead guilty to producing three ancillary state-wide discussion programs, "Visions and Nightmares," "Dixie '76" and "Public Money and Public Libraries." These programs, based (with the obvious exception of "Public Money and Public Libraries") on readings in Mississippi and Southern literature and history, were funded by the Mississippi Committee for the Humanities, and were provided in response to the demand of public librarians. All told, 138 programs were presented throughout the state, programs which involved almost 2500 Mississippians in public discussions of humanities materials drawn from their cultural heritage. It should be admitted that no effort was made to distinguish between these ancillary projects and MWIC, and fortunately for us, the public accepted them as part of the overall project and participated with enthusiasm, as will be seen in the evaluation of the projects prepared for the MCH, included here as Appendix C. In our judgment, these projects provided cohesion, substance and local visibility to a project which might otherwise have continued to flounder.

And one word more. Once the original grant period had expired and the project directors were swept up again in full-time teaching and committee work (not to mention such research activities as they could squeeze in), their duties in MWIC assumed a certain nightmarish quality. As we have suggested earlier, the flawed quality of some of the booklets (and the tardy nature of this narrative report) can be attributed to the ensuing disproportionate ratio of obligations to available time. To be sure, we lacked the good sense to plead for additional funds for administration in our requests for extensions, and we are not complaining. But we do suggest that it would probably be a wise rule to fund additional released time in any extension of a grant period in which project directors, as was the case in MWIC, have many complicated tasks yet to perform.

III. RESULTS

We regret to say that our efforts to muster "hard facts" concerning the impact of MWIC have been less than successful. As we promised to do, we attempted to measure the effectiveness of the project in stimulating the use of humanities resources in Mississippi public libraries through a periodic sampling of circulation figures. Unfortunately, however, those figures reflected little if any change during the course of the original grant period. Thus the only hard evidence we have to offer concerning the way MWIC affected the reading habits of the patrons of our public libraries is set forth on pages 7 and 8 (and in the statistical tables) of Appendix C, the evaluation of the three ancillary projects mentioned above. Assuming that the public responded truthfully, we can say that "Visions and Nightmares" and "Dixie '76," which flourished as integral components of MWIC, caused a significant number of Mississippians to read important works of literature and history, and stimulated in many more a desire to read. What is more, some of our most astute administrative librarians--e.g. Betty Kemp, of Lee County-Tupelo, Norman Graham, of Gulfport-Harrison County, and Richard Greene, of Mid-Mississippi--report that they detect a marked increase in the use of humanities resources in their libraries (and, what is surely more important, a qualitative improvement in the use of humanities resources) as a result of MWIC. And, as we mentioned in an earlier section, the booklets and TV cassettes produced by MWIC, flawed and uneven as they are, continue to show vigorous signs of life. At the present time, for example, five of the nine sets of the A Climate For Genius cassettes owned by the Mississippi Library Commission are out on loan, and we are assured that this figure reflects the normal and continuing demand for them. In the final analysis, however, it is impossible to tell how widely disseminated A Climate For Genius is in the state, for every public library possessing the appropriate equipment has made its own copy of the cassettes, as have (with permission) all our institutions of higher learning and most of our junior colleges. In short, MWIC lives, and the Library Commission receives every week out-of-state requests for cassettes and for information concerning the project.

Surely the most valuable and durable benefit of the project is the widespread and warm rapport now existing between our humanists and public librarians, a rapport which may very well be unique in the nation. As Dr. Rochell noted in his interim report, "there is no doubt that, in a very, very healthy way, the public libraries and the academic humanities in Mississippi will never be the same." On the public programs side of the street humanists and librarians continue to work together and continue to "think big" in a way that would have been inconceivable in the years before MWIC. At the present time, for example, a state-wide humanities program entitled "The Right to Be Heard" is being offered in fifty of our public libraries. Funded by the Mississippi Committee for the Humanities to the Mississippi Library Commission, this program is an obvious spin-off of MWIC and one which would not have seen the light of day if MWIC had not established the aforementioned community of interest among humanists and librarians. Moreover, Dr. Cora Norman, Executive Director of the Mississippi Committee for the Humanities, reports an upsurge in the number of proposals submitted by individual librarians to the MCH. In other words, sales in humanities programs in public libraries are up, and MWIC seems primarily responsible.

Similarly, Dr. Norman (who may be the best witness for the defense in these proceedings) perceives other less tangible but surely important benefits of the MWIC project. In her view, the showings of A Climate for Genius on the Mississippi ETV network did a great deal to give the humanities an aura of relevance and respectability in the minds of our citizenry because, perhaps for the first time, many of them came to recognize that their own heritage is rich in humanities content. To put it another way, many of them seemed to understand for the first time that they had a cultural heritage to be proud of precisely because that heritage relates so obviously to the realm of civilized letters. And, what is also surely important, MWIC stressed the fact that Mississippi has an integrated literary heritage, one enriched by Richard Wright as well as by Welty, Faulkner and the Percys. If it did nothing else in this connection MWIC clearly touched the Black community in Mississippi by featuring Margaret Walker Alexander, Black novelist and faculty member of Jackson State University, as a discussant in the "A Native Son" segment of the TV series.

On a more mundane level Dr. Norman tells us that MWIC was helpful in penetrating areas of Mississippi, particularly in the Southern part of the state, which previously had been inaccessible to the activities of the Mississippi Committee for the Humanities. In other words, our project not only made significant contributions in relating the humanities to the personal lives and values of Mississippians but also developed new markets for humanities activities in every part of our state.

Finally, we might add that the Mississippi Committee for the Humanities is currently in the process of establishing a pilot program which will place resident humanists in Mississippi communities during the coming summer months. It is to be noted that the humanist so placed will have as his or her base of operations the local public library, and that the entire humanist in residence concept arises naturally for the efforts of those district humanists who fought the good fight in MWIC.

In sum, then, we conclude that MWIC must be regarded as an analogue of the Battle of the Bulge. At the time of Dr. Rochell's interim report there did indeed seem to be a great deal of smoke and confusion, and the forces of sweetness and light appeared to be relatively helpless in the fell clutch of circumstance. In retrospect, however, we can see that MWIC was tending not to defeat but rather to clumsy and disorganized victory. We hope and trust that the Endowment will share this retrospective estimate of the campaign.

IV. RESULTS

Our primary problem in sustaining the fertile partnership which MWIC grought about between humanists and librarians is, needless to say, a problem of money. In the face of declining enrollments, most of our state-supported institutions of higher learning are finding it difficult to make ends meet. Similarly, the Mississippi Library Commission cannot be said to suffer from a superabundance of legislative generosity. We were, therefore, understandably disappointed when the Endowment declined to fund our proposal (FHMPL) for an ongoing planning and development consortium of humanists and librarians, which we had envisioned as an independent administrative structure which might keep the MWIC process going in an orderly way. We shall persevere, however, in our attempts to secure funds from other sources.

As will be inferred from the preceding section, we seem to have established a lively tradition in the matter of public humanities programs in Mississippi public libraries. It is a tradition that shows every sign of being able to stand on its own feet, and it is our hope that it will continue to thrive for many years to come. Paradoxically, however, (in view of the thrust of MWIC to public programs) those of us who were associated in the project think of the future not in terms of public programs but rather in terms of finding some means of buying released time for academic humanists to enable them to serve public librarians and to contribute to the adult education function of public libraries in an unhurried way and on a long-term basis. In other words, we should like to do on a continuing basis exactly what the Endowment desired for us to do in MWIC as per the letter from Jeff Field quoted earlier. In this connection Dan Hise surely spoke for all of us when he wrote

> I believe that a humanist of the academic variety is not completely alive and functioning unless he commits himself

to something beyond the campus and its neutral territory. The public library seems an ideal place to make connections with the surrounding community, and I think the MWIC project got us headed in the right direction. I for one think it would be a shame if we didn't make an attempt to take it further.

If we can find some money, then, and if somebody can convince obtuse academic administrators in this state that the activity indicated is as valuable to the scholar and his institution as research and publication, we expect to be heard from in the future.

Thus the project directors bid adieu (or is it only au revoir?) to the National Endowment for the Humanities. We are profoundly grateful for the confidence and support that enabled us to pursue the MWIC project, and we remain convinced that our project has made a lasting and beneficial impact in our state. We are especially grateful to Jeff Field, who was during most of our grant period our contact man at the Endowment. His unfailing courtesy and helpfulness will not be forgotten by the MWIC project directors or indeed by anyone else associated with the project. Finally, we wish to congratulate ourselves on our good fortune in procuring the services of Dr. Rochell as our evaluator. He taught us what public libraries are all about, and, once he came on board, gave our project (and our flagging spirits) an immense lift.